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**An Analysis of Soccer Referee Demographics and Motivational Factors in the Western Kentucky Soccer
Officials Association**

By

Daniel Hasko

A research project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Science degree in Mass Communication

Murray State University

Daniel Hasko, Murray, Kentucky, United States, 2021

Abstract

Through a lens of the Knowledge Gap Theory of Mass Communication and the consideration of Media Framing Theory, this research examined the demographics of soccer referees in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association, in addition to the leading motivations for beginning, continuing, and leaving their officiating vocation. With the knowledge of the aforementioned, this paper aimed to lay the groundwork for a strategic communication plan in the officiating community that addresses the alarming trend that is a lack of certified referees in youth athletics. The data was collected through online surveys that were distributed to active referees in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association. While individuals identified many motivations, results suggested that the theme of *enjoyment in affiliation* or the “love of the game” is far and away the leading reason for referees to both begin their careers and continue their careers, as the study reveals that intrinsic motivation is extremely significant for officials. Further, *referee abuse* is the leading reason that referees have pondered walking away from the game. Finally, while the reasons are still unknown, the demographic portion of the research did communicate that the respondents generally belonged to the higher socioeconomic classes of society. They were also predominantly and disproportionately white, exclusively male, and held advanced educational degrees at a higher rate than the general population. Higher household incomes and a median age that would be considered by most as middle-aged were also themes that emerged, while most had played soccer competitively at a minimum of the high school level.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Table of Contents	4-5
Chapter I – Introduction.....	6
Brief History of the Context	7
Statement of the Problem	7-8
Research Question/Research Objective	8
Key Definitions.....	8-9
Overview of the Thesis	9
Chapter II – Literature Review	10
Demographic Trends.....	10-12
Intrinsic Motivation.....	12-13
Extrinsic Motivation	14-15
Strategic Communication and Organizational Support in Retention	15-18
Referees and the Media.....	18-19
Gap in Literature	19-20
Theoretical Framework.....	20-21
Chapter III – Methodology	22
Methodology.....	22
Population of Study.....	23
Questionnaire	23-24
Ethical Considerations.....	24

Data Analysis.....	24
Chapter IV – Data Results, Analysis, and Discussion.....	25
Demographics	25
Motivation to Begin Officiating.....	26-27
Motivation for Continuing to Officiate	27-28
Reasons to Stop Officiating	28-29
Analysis.....	30-31
Chapter V – Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations	32
Summary	32
Conclusion.....	32-34
Limitations.....	34
Recommendations for Future Research/Strategic Communication Plan.....	35-36
References	37-38
Appendix A – Informed Consent Form	39-40
Appendix B - Solicitation Letter	41
Appendix C - Survey Questionnaire	42
Appendix D - Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval.....	43

Chapter I - Introduction

Referees are a required aspect of athletic competition. With duties that include ensuring a fair contest through the appropriate application of rules and player management, officials have a massive role in the sports industry across the globe. In high schools alone, just shy of eight million students participate in high school athletics each year in the United States (NFHS, 2019). In order to continue providing the opportunity for sanctioned competition, there is an urgent need to reverse an alarming trend in many referee communities – one that sees difficulty retaining licensed officials at all levels of competition each year (Cuskelly & Hoye, 2014). It is important then to analyze not only a referee's motivation that serves as the fuel for keeping them active in their role as an official, but also evaluate demographic information that can either identify potential barriers to entry, or even recognize common traits that assist in creating a target group for the recruitment of new officials.

There are many generalizations made as to why organizations are not able to retain licensed officials, many of which are related to external factors such as *referee abuse*. However, while this certainly does have an impact, it is important to note that intrinsic motivation (Livingston & Forbes 2016) and other internal factors are vital for the longevity of an official, and officials who have been involved in the game in another capacity before officiating often have longer survival rates (Rullang, Emrich & Pierdzioch, 2017).

For the purpose of this research, the study will focus on active National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) officials in the Western Kentucky Officials Association (WKSOA). The WKSOA works in coordination with the Kentucky High School Athletic Association (KHSAA) to help govern soccer officiating in its Regions I and II in western Kentucky.

Brief History of the Context

With an understanding of the aforementioned motivational factors and demographic information, referee organizations can utilize strategic communication methods to recruit new officials and reiterate systemic support for current referees and the obstacles they face. Additionally, public relations tactics can assist in improving the image of referee organizations to communicate an identity of inclusion towards underrepresented demographic groups in the community. This research attempts to lay the foundation for developing future strategic communication efforts within organizations similar to the WKSOA.

Statement of the Problem

While the retention of licensed officials is a growing problem (Cuskelly & Hoyer, 2014), the increasing age of the current referee pool is also a cause for concern. Other research groups in the United States have revealed the median age in referee pools to be in the mid-50s, with *physical limitations* being a reason cited by 58% for those looking to quit officiating (Ridinger, Warner, Tingle, & Kim, 2017).

Further, previous studies demonstrate a lack of diversity in the officiating community in the United States – one that many times is comprised disproportionately of white, well-educated males with a household income that ranks in the middle to upper middle class (Ridinger, Warner, Tingle & Kim, 2017).

Additionally, an understanding of motivational factors for referees will lay the foundation for a strategic communication plan for both recruitment and retention of officials, as only 4.16% of referees began their vocation as a result of seeing an ad or information from a specific association website or bulletin board (NASO, 2017). This suggests that many governing bodies in the referee world do not currently have a strategic communication plan in place for recruitment or retention which could

drastically improve the relationship with those that may not be *actively looking* to become involved in officiating, but have a desire to have a role in the sports community.

Research Questions and Research Objective

The main objective of the study is to identify the following: 1) determine the demographics of the high school soccer officials in Western Kentucky that includes age, gender, race, education level, income, and playing experience and 2) determine the most reported reasons why officials in Western Kentucky began their officiating careers, continue their officiating careers, and finally why they would think about leaving their vocation as a referee.

The findings of this study should contribute to strategies for both the recruitment and retention of referees through the lens of public relations, while also providing a basis for a strategic communication plan targeted at underrepresented demographics in the officiating community.

Key Definitions

The following section will define the WKSOA, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and “officials” which will all be significant terms within this thesis.

WKSOA

The acronym WKSOA stands for Western Kentucky Soccer Officials association, which works in coordination with the Kentucky High School Athletic Association (KHSAA) to help govern soccer high school soccer officiating in Regions I and II in western Kentucky. The referee unit has an average annual membership of approximately 30-50 dues-paying officials and holds consistent elections for board members within the association.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation, in its classic definition (Ryan & Deci, 2000) refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable. In the context of this paper, this refers to referee

motivations that originate from internal desires rather than external rewards like monetary compensation or opportunity for advancement.

Extrinsic Motivation

Contrasting to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In relation to this study, it pertains to referee motivation that stems from rewards or incentives rather than internal emotional fulfillment.

Officials

For the purpose of this paper, the term “officials” is used interchangeably with “referee” to mean one that enforces the rules of athletic competitions.

Overview of the Thesis

In chapter two I review research literature on the primary reasons that referees persist in their vocation as well as leading causes for dropouts. Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivational factors are explored among officials in addition to the analysis of demographic factors among referees across a variety of sports and locations.

Chapter three will then consist of a presentation of the methodology used in this research, which utilized a questionnaire that was distributed to current referees in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association. Further information about the data analysis process and coding are provided, as well as the limitations to the methodology of the study.

The fourth chapter will communicate the findings of the study and the themes that surfaced from the questionnaire responses. Additionally, the coding process will be explained and a sample technique will be provided for the analysis. Finally, chapter five will summarize the project and dive into recommendations for further research in this subject area.

Chapter II – Literature Review

While various reasons exist as to why referees decide to quit officiating, it is important to note that the end of their officiating careers could have been avoided in a large number of instances. In Rullang, Emrich, and Pierdziuch's (2017) study of former German soccer referees, for example, 38.68% reported that the end of their officiating careers could have been avoided.

Demographic Trends

Previous research of approximately 17,000 officials in two high school athletic associations revealed alarming demographic trends in the referee community. Of the respondents, 89% identified as male, while 81% were Caucasian. Additionally, the results communicated a strong trend in household income, with 72% of referees reporting at least \$65,000 annually in their households (Ridinger, Warner, Tingle, & Kim, 2017).

This above cited research also had an average age of 54 among respondents, which is an intriguing statistic for a variety of reasons. Not only do officials near the median age face challenges socially relating to the players that compete in the contests in which they officiate, but this key demographic also closely relates to the drop-out rates of officials as 58% mentioned *physical limitations* as a reason to discontinue officiating – something that is more common among older officials.

While organizations have found it challenging to recruit younger officials, perhaps the more concerning part is that, according to a 2018 study from the National Federation of State High School Associations, only 20% of referees continue after their first two years (NFHS, 2018). Additionally, while 46% of high school athletes are females in the United States, only 11% of the referees that officiate their games are women.

Beyond the surface demographic data that is identifiable within referee communities, Livingston and Forbes' (2016) research indicated that males and females experience different levels of decreasing intrinsic motivation over time. Higher levels of amotivation are reported in female officials over time, while they also have shorter survival rates than their male counterparts. Additionally, experiences vary between urban and rural settings, with less perceived organizational support in urban areas being a consistent theme.

Further, referees residing in rural areas spend much more time and money on officiating – due in part to longer travel times and less qualified officials to cover scheduled matches (Cuskelly, Graham & Hoye, Russell, 2014).

It is clear that, even in the 21st century, substantial barriers still exist for minority officials – especially women. Lack of mutual respect among fellow officials, perceived inequity in policies, lack of role models, and gendered abuse are all common themes that surfaced among the experiences of female sport officials (Tingle, Warner, & Sartore-Baldwin, 2014).

Further, in Tingle, Warner, and Sartore's (2014, p. 14) study of former female basketball officials, one interviewee from this research stated:

“Female officials are still looked at as an oddity, particularly, if you do boy's games. But still even in our area, most of the officials are men. And you would think like, ‘OK, here we are, 2000, whatever. This is the 21 century, we've made progress on that’ . . . but, not really in the local areas. If you look at the WNBA or if Women's (NCAA) Division I officiating and the big conferences, you're going to see a ton of women. I mean they've really, really, really worked on that, but not at the small local levels. You don't see much of a change in that.

Another stated: it's especially hard knowing that you're more experienced than your partners out there, but you're the one getting yelled at, because of your gender.”

Previous research has revealed that while 82.14% of female officials felt they have the authority to remove spectators for abusive actions, trends suggest that most do not utilize this authority for various reasons that include fear of physical safety (Bley, 2020).

Finally, according to Cuskelly and Hoyer (2014), word of mouth is a leading form of recruitment – further suggesting the idea of a gendered knowledge gap that stems from a “good ‘ol boys” network exists in the officiating community.

Intrinsic Motivation

It is important to realize that intrinsic motivation is a vital component that contributes to referee retention. Further, these internal factors can change over time, and also vary across different groups of people. For example, a 2016 study of Canadian officials revealed that females tended to derive less pleasure from officiating as they aged and gained experience in the activity (Livingston, & Forbes, 2016). In this study, officials from a variety of sports were observed, and a consistent theme was identified where referees in team/field sports had a much higher and faster rate of decline regarding their intrinsic motivation over time than that of officials in individual sports. This can be attributed to the pressure that is applied externally by players and coaches in combination with the rapidity that is required to make game-critical decisions.

With the aforementioned in mind regarding the decline in intrinsic motivation, it is important to know that intrinsic values do have a significant impact on the reasons that referees begin their officiating journeys in the first place, with 58% citing that *enjoyable affiliation* was a key reason that they began officiating (Ridinger, Warner, Tingle, & Kim, 2017).

Building off the concept of *enjoyable affiliation*, referees that have no experience playing the sport often have lower survival rates in the vocation, while officials that are transitioning from a competitive playing career at some capacity have much higher rates of retention (Rullang, Emrich, & Pierdzioch, 2017). Former players oftentimes pursue officiating as a way to stay involved with the game

even after their competitive playing days have come to an end. In this scenario, being a referee satisfies that intrinsic desire and passion that comes with having an active role in sport. It is critical then, to develop recruitment strategies that target individuals in the playing ranks as it could effectively identify individuals with a higher level of intrinsic motivation while also assisting in the effort to recruit younger officials to combat a relatively high median age that is evident in the current pool of qualified individuals (Livingston & Forbes, 2016).

Along these same lines, it is easy to see the negative impacts that a lack of intrinsic motivation can have on the retention of referees. In the instance of a 2013 study of youth sports referees in France, a relatively high number of survey respondents (41%) wish or wished to stop officiating (Dosseville, Rioult & Laborde, 2013). In this particular situation, referees began officiating out of necessity from their local sport clubs as the clubs are subject to financial penalties if they are unable to provide officials. Because of this, referees are forced to begin their careers out of necessity rather than internal desire. In turn, when external factors do come into play such as referee abuse, there is less of a tolerance to persist as there is no intrinsic backing. This is a reasonable explanation for the unusually high rate of 41% revealing that they wish or wished to stop officiating.

Additionally, factors urging referees to quit their vocation can stem from intrinsic values such as the thought of perceived failure when officiating matches (Roome II, (2016).

In Johansen's (2015) work, differences are highlighted between amateur and elite referees. One of these differences is fitness, as just 13% of elite referees gave physical fitness as a reason for continuing to referee as opposed to 31% of their amateur counterparts. This reemphasizes the differences between intrinsic motivation and how they can change over time as elite referees treat the vocation closer to that of a normal occupation. Amateur referees officiate to stay in shape, while elite referees get in shape to referee.

Extrinsic Motivation

It has also been identified that certain levels of extrinsic motivation have a significant impact on retention rates such as achievement, camaraderie, and affirmation (Roome II, 2016).

External factors can also have a profound impact on persuading referees to quit their vocation of officiating, as abuse from players, coaches, and spectators is a leading reason that influences officials to quit (Roome II, 2016).

Roome's work also revealed that a lack of perceived organizational support from local referee units and state associations was a significant factor that contributed to referees deciding to end their vocation (Roome II, 2016). Along these same lines, Cuskelly and Hoyer's research (2014) indicates that one of the reasons behind this is the result of a lack of a referee presence in decision-making positions of these governing bodies within athletic associations.

Additionally, Cuskelly and Hoyer (2014) reveal that training and education in how to deal with conflict situations is inadequate, while the feedback provided to referees at the grassroots level is also insufficient – meaning many referees have very little guidance or awareness of performance strengths or weaknesses in the early stages of their careers. This research also identifies that there is an underlying assumption from organizations that every referee is seeking career advancement. This is simply not true, and while it is important to have pathways dedicated for those that desire to climb the ranks, many officials are not looking to advance, and the focus should be shifted towards retaining these referees at their current levels rather than focusing on the small percentage of individuals that will ascend to elite status.

Emphasizing the influence that external factors can have on the longevity of officials, those that spent more than 10 hours per week on their referee activity have the lowest survival rates. Conversely, the highest rates for among those referees who spend between one and three hours per week on

refereeing (Rullang, Emrich, & Pierdzioch, 2017). This can almost certainly be attributed to burn out as a result of negative external stimuli such as abuse.

Also important to note is that motivations do change over time. This is especially true when it comes to financial compensation, as this serves as an extremely effective motivator for younger officials at the beginning of their careers, but then gradually decreases over time and is not a significant long-term factor for retention for adult referees (Cuskelly, Graham & Hoye, Russell, 2014). Additionally, a lack of conflict management skills in younger people has translated to an exit point for many officials in the younger stages of their careers as they are uncomfortable and ill-prepared to handle abusive situations on the playing field.

Finally, when weighing factors related to recruitment of new, younger officials, the initial startup costs to cover uniforms, clinics, and other necessary materials is relatively high compared to other jobs that could be attained – especially by prospective referees under 18 years of age (Cuskelly, Graham & Hoye, Russell, 2014).

Strategic Communication and Organizational Support in Retention

Cuskelly and Hoye (2014) also describes the communication of development plans from local referee associations as ineffective in many cases due to a lack of integration with larger governing bodies.

In order for any organization to reach its performance and economic-based long-term goals, they must combat employee dropout rates through the implementation of a strategic plan. This strategic communication plan should transmit the vision and values of the organization and, most importantly, how employees can contribute to them (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015). Additionally, it is crucial that the retention plan highlights diversity, inclusion, and transparency (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015).

It is also recognized that not all prospective employees (or referees for the case of this study) are searching for lifelong jobs. However, being able to identify whether or not a person is a good "fit" for this role will have substantial benefits in both performance and retention (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill, & Pemberton-Jones, 2015).

Connecting to intrinsic motivation and the idea of perceived organizational support, it is also imperative that referee organizations foster a clear organizational culture, as a clear understanding of culture allows for the identification of emotional attachment, and is proven to have a high influence on employee retention (Anitha, 2016).

Research has indicated that, while a lack of organizational support is a factor at all levels, it is even more so a cause for concern at the beginning stages of a referees' career at the grassroots level - a stage where retention rates are poor (Cuskelly, Graham & Hoyer, Russell, 2014).

Along the same lines as organizational culture and environment, having a sense of community is essential in the referee vocation – especially at the amateur level. At this level, the social nature is a significant contributing factor to a referees' motivation to persist. This pairs closely with other intrinsic motivators such as the enjoyment from being involved with the game (Kellett, & Warner, 2011).

A phenomenological study of referees in Indiana revealed that camaraderie is also a significant motivating factor for referees' intentions to persist. The development of relationships that revolve around the sport as well as with other key publics allows for a perceived sport network that officials enjoy (Roome II, 2016).

While important at the amateur level, the realm where the majority of referees exist, it is important to note that having a sense of community becomes less important as officials move up the ranks – especially to those who wish to pursue a professional career. This is connected to the idea that a greater devotion of time and effort, coupled with a massive increase of pressure, makes the vocation of a referee more like that of a traditional job than that of a leisure activity as this professional

advancement carries some isolating properties. This is an intriguing concept as, further, Kellett and Warner (2011) communicates the idea that referees at the professional level have almost no grasp on the understanding of why referees at the amateur level continue to officiate. With this said, it should be noted that mentors and educators in referee communities that are officials at an extremely high level may have trouble relating to the group of grassroots/amateur officials to which they are speaking.

A recurring theme of organizational support is echoed in Kim and Yip's (2018) findings where referees depended on the quality of the exchange relationship with their sport association in regards to retention. When referees feel that they have organizational support, they will reciprocate that effort with dedication to their craft. There is an urgent need for organizational support for younger referees and those newer to the vocation, as dropout rates are the highest in the first five years of officiating.

This organizational support is also instrumental in generating a psychological connection between referees and their vocation, which increases the likelihood of persisting through obstacles along the way such as abuse or low pay (Kim, & Yip, 2018).

While developing a strategy for the recruitment of new officials is crucial to ensure that there is a sufficient number of referees available to work athletic competitions, retention is equally as important if not more vital to the overall process. As previously mentioned, 80% of high school officials were hanging up their boots after just two years as a referee (NFHS, 2018). With this in mind, it is important to realize that the recruitment of officials is truly only half the battle.

Referees that are already in the vocation seek greater levels of support from overarching administrations by way of communication, mentorship, and the opportunity for advancement (Livingston & Forbes, 2016). Livingston and Forbes also communicated that the lack of perceived organizational support is more noticeable among female referees in urban settings, but there is a lack research as to why experiences vary between urban and rural settings. It is possible, however, that with

a higher referee population in urban settings, this could simply be a product of being understaffed at the higher levels of the organization.

Referees and the Media

Further, it has been communicated by former referees that the media does play a role in increased pressure on officials, and journalists reiterate that the way in which they critique referee decisions during or after the competitions in postgame coverage contributes to higher stress levels in decision-making situations for referees (Baldwin, 2008).

With perceived failure a significant cause of fear among officials, the negative experiences that referees face during matches are harmful to self-esteem and therefore contribute desires to leave the profession. A correlation also exists between the fear of physical abuse and self-esteem. Additionally, while negative media coverage fuels an increased level of psychological pressure, there is also a strong connection between fear of failure and a referees' self-esteem (Belkacem & Salih, 2018).

When looking at recruitment barriers, the media contributes to a public perception that portrays referees in a negative light. In the eyes of many athletes and fans, referees are stubborn, highly neurotic, introverted, and opposed to exciting experiences. This robot-like perception that has been set by the media is being adopted by the public and is discouraging to prospective referees (Balch & Scott, 2007).

There also seems to be a lack of awareness among the general public as to what is acceptable sideline behavior by spectators, coaches, and players during a match, which could be connected to how the media dehumanizes referees and normalizes abuse. Referees report observing inappropriate behavior at a much more common frequency than do coaches, which could suggest that there is not a shared understanding on where the line should be drawn between appropriate and abusive behavior (Walters, Schluter, Stamp, Thomson & Payne, 2016).

Further exploring the effects that media has on referees, the negative public perception of referees is cause for concern. A 2016 study in *The International Journal of the History of Sport* reveals that “The referee is viewed as the enemy by football supporters, and is often seen as ‘the problem’ when their team loses” (Webb, 2016). While various media outlets and research studies have allowed referees to “fight back” with their own voice within media in an attempt to reshape the public’s perceptions of sport officials, criticism of referee decisions in the media still has a profound impact on the stress levels of referees. Additionally, controversial referee decisions are often analyzed with a sensationalized negative spin in order to drive traffic to media platforms or grab the attention of an audience – both of which are detrimental to the well-being of a referee.

Media undoubtedly plays a significant role in the general public’s perception of referees, and it has become increasingly difficult to reshape this role as a referee with a positive image. This comes as the focus of many media outlets revolves around referee mistakes, and criticism far outweighs praise towards officials in postgame commentary and analysis (Cuskelly, Graham & Hoyer, Russell, 2014).

Gap in Literature

While some prior research on the topic of referee recruitment and retention exists, rarely does it examine the issue through the lens of communication. Additionally, existing works consistently take an approach of either qualitative analysis or quantitative analysis, but this paper is uniquely situated in a blend of both. In drawing connections between demographic data and trends of recruitment and retention of officials through open-ended responses, the underlying goal is to lay the groundwork necessary for the development of a strategic communication plan to address alarming trends in the referee community. Further, through the *knowledge gap theory* of mass communication and the consideration of the *media framing* theories that will be explored in the following section, this research considers a different way of attempting to understand officials and their needs. Finally, much of the aforementioned previous research has been done outside of the United States, or in places within the

United States that do not closely resemble the culture and values of Western Kentucky as does this paper.

Theoretical Framework – Knowledge Gap Theory

This paper takes an approach that is rooted in Knowledge Gap Theory. The theory, which was first introduced in 1970 by three researchers at the University of Minnesota, revealed that when a social system is infused with information from the mass media, individuals that belong to higher socioeconomic segments tend to acquire information faster than those that exist within lower socioeconomic status groups (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970). In fact, while an influx in the dissemination of information has traditionally been perceived as a means to bridge gaps between socioeconomic classes, this theory argues that the increased information actually widens the gap as information acquisition takes place at different rates and becomes a problem that worsens exponentially with the increase in information.

In order to address this trend in the context of this framework, communicative strategies must change as a result of a “communication breakdown.” This occurs when a societal problem grows to the point where it is deemed unsalvageable through the current methods of communication (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1975). A cause and effect relationship occurs where the problem serves as a stimuli for the community’s new communication efforts that are aimed at reaching underrepresented demographics that are victims of the knowledge gap. In the context of this research, the stimuli is the cancellation of high school athletic events that stems from the lack of certified referees. While a shortage of officials is something that extends beyond that of a local conflict, it is indeed the present element of proximity that can serve as one of the most influential methods of reducing the knowledge gap. The referee community is one that can be largely dependent on networking and the “who you know,” which often translates to a lack of diversity and missed opportunities regarding the recruitment of certain groups of individuals that would make good referees. While the issues in the officiating

community might not completely echo those that are typically associated with knowledge gap theory, when considering the best ways to create a foundation for the implementation of a public relations strategy that caters to a broader group of individuals in the community, it is necessary that we recognize that boundaries in the acquisition of information exist in certain groups depending on socioeconomic status.

Framing Theory

This research also considers the possible impact that media framing theory has on the public's perception and criticism of referees and the related shortage of qualified officials. This theory is based on the assumption that the way issues are characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In the context of officiating and as noted in the aforementioned literature, the focus of many media outlets revolves around referee mistakes, and criticism far outweighs praise towards officials in postgame commentary and analysis (Cuskelly, Graham & Hoye, Russell, 2014). This can have a direct impact on how players, coaches, and fans perceive the decisions of referees and therefore leads to further problems of abuse and harassment. The thought here is that the public assumes officials make more wrong decisions than correct decisions as that is what is covered in the media. As outlined previously, referee decisions are also examined through the lens of sensationalized negativity in order to drive traffic to media platforms. These "attention grabbing" techniques that are critical of match officials are also detrimental to the well-being of referees (Webb, 2016).

Chapter III - Methodology

This chapter outlines the qualitative and quantitative methods that are utilized in this research of the demographics and motivational factors of the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association. Also detailed in this section is the selection process of research participants, the strategies behind data collection and analysis, and finally the content of the questionnaire that was employed in this project. I obtained approval to conduct the following research through Murray State University's Institutional Review Board.

Methodology

As previously outlined in this paper, a shortage of licensed referees and the lack of ability for official's organizations to retain referees is a cause for concern in the athletic community. While it is evident that the implementation of a strategic communication plan is vital to reversing this alarming trend, it is necessary to answer the following research questions:

- What are the demographic dynamics of the high school soccer officials in Western Kentucky?
- What are the motivations for recruitment, the reasons that enhance retention, and the factors that contribute to soccer referees quitting their vocation in western Kentucky?

In order to answer these research questions, an eleven-question survey was distributed via email directly to the research participants as defined below. Participants were ensured that their identities would remain anonymous. The results of the survey should provide a clear foundation for a strategic communication plan directed toward recruitment and retention of referees – especially those in underrepresented demographics.

Population of Study

The population of this study was comprised of all current referees that are members of the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association. The referees in this association are responsible for officiating high school soccer matches in regions I and II in the Kentucky High School Athletic Association (KHSAA) which spans from its western-most point in Fulton County (Region I) all the way to the eastern ends of Henderson, Webster, Hopkins, and Christian Counties (Region II) in the state of Kentucky (USA).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire utilized in this study featured a combination of closed and open-ended questions. The complete questionnaire distributed to the participants was the following:

1. How many years have you been officiating high school soccer?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your approximate gross yearly household income?
4. What is your Race?
5. What is your gender?
6. What is your highest level of soccer PLAYING experience?
7. What is your highest level of education?
 - Did not complete high school
 - Completed High School/GED Equivalent
 - Completed Two-Year / Associate's College Degree
 - Completed Bachelor's Degree
 - Completed Master's Degree
 - Completed Professional / Doctoral Degree
8. Why did you begin officiating high school soccer?

9. Why do you continue officiating?
10. Have you seriously thought about quitting your officiating vocation in the last three years?
11. If the answer to the previous is yes, why would you decide to quit officiating?

Ethical Considerations

Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured as survey results populated in Google Forms were not linked to anyone's identity. The survey information was stored on a password-protected, cloud-based storage platform, and was then backed up on an external password-protected hard drive.

Along with the distribution of the questionnaire was a consent form (Appendix A) that reiterated the goals of the study, and communicated the ability to withdraw or stop participating in the research at any time. Once the data was analyzed, I provided a report to the research participants with the findings. The research population was not compensated for participating in the study.

Data Analysis

The research was then coded using an inductive approach towards category development, where two coders were utilized to establish inter-coder reliability. Cohen's kappa coefficient further measured the agreement between coders in order to assess the validity and consistency of the coding in an attempt to draw clear, concise conclusions. A 98.5% rate of reliability was achieved across all coded responses.

Chapter IV – Data Results, Analysis, and Discussion

After gathering the responses from the questionnaire, I separated the questions into either qualitative responses or quantitative responses depending on their format. Some of the survey questions were more open-ended and needed to be coded, while others pertaining to demographic information did not need coding.

The questionnaire was sent to 36 current members in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association, while 21 chose to participate in the study translating to a 58% participation rate.

Demographics

The results indicated (rounding to the nearest whole number) that 90% (19) of research participants were white, while 5% (1) was Hispanic and 5% (1) did not provide an identifiable response. The average age of respondents was 48, with a high of 69 and a low of 30. Additionally, 33% of participants were over the age of 55. All 21 respondents identified as male. Additionally, the median household income of the 18 (three elected not to answer this question) referees in this study was \$107,166. Further, 50% reported \$120,000 or more. When it came to education, 81% (17) had at least a two-year college degree, while 71% (15) earned a Bachelor's degree. 57% (12) reported that they had completed a master's degree, and finally just shy of 10% (2) indicated that they possess a doctorate/professional degree. Finally, the participants in this study have been licensed high school officials for an average of 14.1 years, with a low end of two and a high end of 39. Additionally, 52% have been officiating for ten or more years. Perhaps the most alarming statistic, 62% of survey respondents indicated that they have seriously considered quitting their officiating vocation in the last three years. 76% of the referees in this study also revealed that they have had playing experience at the high school level or higher.

Motivation to Begin Officiating

Beyond the demographic information that was collected in the questionnaire, the research also aimed to identify the leading reasons why individuals are motivated to begin their careers in officiating. The open-ended format of this question in the survey required a coded analysis in which an inductive approach to the formation of the themes was utilized. The themes that emerged are noted below in Table 1. Further, the results were coded by two different coders, and Cohen's Kappa coefficient was implemented to measure inter-coder reliability.

Table 1: Coding Themes

Why did you begin officiating high school soccer?	
Code	Code Definition
Enjoyment in Affiliation	<i>Possessing a desire to be involved in the game of soccer through the vocation of a referee. For example: "I played and coached. When finished with that, I wanted to stay involved in the game."</i>
Physical Benefits	<i>Communicating that exercise or another element of officiating that contributes to the betterment of the human body as a motivating factor. Example: "I wanted the exercise."</i>
Financial Interests	<i>Monetary compensation in exchange for services as referee is a primary reason for taking up the vocation. Example: "I do it to make a little extra money."</i>
Necessity	<i>Respondent began their vocation as a referee in order to address the lack of certified officials. Example: "I began due to the fact that I knew there was a need for referees."</i>

The theme of *Enjoyment in Affiliation* was far and away the theme that was most prevalent in the responses. After running Cohen's Kappa in this instance, coders actually achieved a perfect kappa score with 100% agreement as both coders determined that 76% of participants on average pointed towards *Enjoyment in Affiliation* as a factor that contributed to beginning their vocation as a referee.

The next most-reported reason for beginning an officiating journey was *necessity*. Between 29% and 33% of participants cited *necessity* after coders established a 95.24% agreement percentage and a Cohen's Kappa of 0.89 which is nearly perfect.

Further, just 19% reported *financial interests*, while 10% offered *physical benefits* as motivation for starting out as a referee. Both of these codes turned out a perfect Kappa score indicating extremely strong agreement in the coding process.

Motivation for Continuing to Officiate

While it is important to understand the motivations for referees beginning their vocation, it is just as crucial to comprehend the factors that contribute to retention as this paper has already communicated the alarming trend of short survival rates for new officials. Through an inductive approach, the themes that surfaced among respondents can be identified in *Table 2* below.

Table 2: Coding Themes

Why do you continue officiating high school soccer?	
Code	Code Definition
Enjoyment in Affiliation	<i>Possessing a desire to be involved in the game of soccer through the vocation of a referee. For example: "I played and coached. When finished with that, I wanted to stay involved in the game."</i>
Physical Benefits	<i>Communicating that exercise or another element of officiating that contributes to the betterment of the human body as a motivating factor. Example: "I wanted the exercise."</i>
Act of Service	<i>Some individuals feel motivated to give back to the community through officiating and view the vocation as a selfless act that has a positive impact on the life of high school athletics. Example: "I ref to give back to the kids."</i>
Financial Interests	<i>Monetary compensation in exchange for services as referee is a primary reason for taking up the vocation. Example: "I do it to make a little extra money."</i>

Necessity	<i>Respondent began their vocation as a referee in order to address the lack of certified officials.</i> Example: "I began due to the fact that I knew there was a need for referees."
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Most of the themes related to retention echoed those present in the original motivation to begin. However, one additional theme emerged: the *Act of Service*. In this scenario, referees viewed their role as one that "gives back" to the community.

Once again, *Enjoyment in Affiliation* was by far the leading motivator for referee retention. Between 71%-76% of respondents included this theme in their open-ended response with a 95.2% of agreement between the two coders with a Cohen's Kappa rating of 0.88 which indicates "almost perfect" agreement.

The themes of *Physical Benefits* and *Necessity* both surfaced in 24% of the respondents, with both coders achieving perfect agreement in both themes. Between 14% and 24% of participants also gave responses related to *Acts of Service* where the coders established a 90.5% agreement and a Cohen's Kappa score of 0.7 which falls in the realm of "substantial agreement." Finally, just 9.5% of research participants gave responses that fell within the definition of *Financial Interests* as a motivating factor to continue officiating. This code also achieved a perfect agreement percentage and Cohen's Kappa score.

Reasons to Stop Officiating

Finally, 62% of research respondents stated that they had seriously considered quitting their vocation as a referee within the last three years. Once again, the survey provided the opportunity for participants to respond with an open-ended response that would once again be coded according to the themes that emerged in the responses. These codes and definitions can be found in *Table 3* below.

Table 3: Coding Themes

What are the reasons that you would decide to quit officiating?	
Code	Code Definition
External Life Conflicts	Responses included outside conflicts with work, family, and other life priorities not associated with officiating that are leading causes to walk away from the referee vocation. <i>Example: "I received a promotion at my day job, and reffing is now difficult with my schedule."</i>
Referee Abuse	Fear of physical safety, verbal abuse from coaches, fans, and players, and a combination of physical/verbal harassment. <i>Example: "Fan abuse. I have been followed to my car after games, and it is not worth it for me."</i>
Physical Limitations	Certain factors, including age, have hindered the ability to perform at what the respondent would consider to be an acceptable level. <i>Example: I'm getting older, and I can't keep up like I used to.</i>
Lack of Perceived Organizational Support	Respondents feel that they do not have adequate backing from game-day administration, official's associations, or national organizations. <i>Example: "Administrators at the competition site do not protect officials, and it seems like nobody on a national level cares about the well-being of referees."</i>

Among those that reported that they had seriously thought about quitting their vocation as a referee within the last three years, the leading reason was *referee abuse*, which turned up in 46% of responses. Two more significant reasons that contributed to the thoughts of walking away from officiating included *External Life Conflicts* and *Physical Limitations* – both of which came back in 38% of responses among those who considered quitting. Finally, 15% of respondents pointed towards a *Lack of Organizational Support* as a reason that they would cease officiating. In each of the four coded themes, inter-coder reliability achieved a 100% agreement rate.

Analysis

Pertaining to the demographics of the referees that participated in this study, the research revealed that consistent themes emerged among officials. They were disproportionately white, well-educated males who exist in the upper-middle class. A high number of advanced degrees and relatively high household incomes were also both present in the data. The respondents also had a good amount of officiating experience on average, and the median age of the referee pool would traditionally fall under the category of “middle-aged.”

When examining the themes surrounding why referees began their vocation and why they continue, it was interesting to see that the leading reasons do not really change for officials over time. *Enjoyment in Affiliation* was a strong motivation both at the start and during the midst of a referee’s career. Additionally, *necessity* was also a prevalent theme at both stages.

There were some motivations that did change over the course of a referee’s career, however, as *Physical Benefits* became more important over time than from when they first began. This could be a result of younger, more active people not valuing the exercise component of officiating as a priority at the start, but see a shift in priority in motivation over time as officiating becomes a form of enjoyable exercise. Similarly, the motivation of *Financial Interests* actually decreased over time. An explanation for this could be related to the earning potential throughout various stages of an individual’s career in their day jobs. For younger people in entry-level positions, the extra income could serve as a more significant motivating factor than for someone who is in the middle stages of a career or is even retired. Similarly, the theme of an *Act of Service* as a motivator emerged in the responses of why officials continue to officiate, but it was not present for people when they were beginning.

With all of the aforementioned analysis in mind, we can see a shift in priorities over the course of an official’s career. When beginning, extrinsic motivation is much more significant, while over time

this transitions to a much more intrinsically-centered motivation. However, above all in both stages, the theme of *Enjoyment in Affiliation* was far and away the strongest motivator. Referees have a desire to be involved in the game in some capacity, and this could potentially be tied to the “love of the game” that is so prominent in former players as 76% of these research participants played competitively at the high school level or above.

As for the reasons why referees would consider quitting, *referee abuse* was the leading theme, while *External Life Conflicts* and *Physical Limitations* were close behind. A connection can reasonably be drawn between *Physical Limitations* and the increasing median age of the referee population as the average age among respondents that cited *Physical Limitations* as a reason to quit was 56.2 - more than eight years older than the average age of all survey respondents. Finally, while lack of perceived organizational support was not evident at a strong level, this theme did exist and could be closely related to abuse as referees feel that they do not have any support from those in authority positions within referee organizations or competition sites that can actually make a positive impact on reducing unacceptable behavior from spectators.

Chapter V – Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary

Through the lens of the Knowledge Gap Theory of Mass Communication and the consideration of Media Framing Theory, this research examined the demographics of soccer referees in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association, in addition to revealing the leading motivations for beginning, continuing, and leaving their officiating vocation. With the knowledge of the aforementioned, this paper aimed to lay the groundwork for a strategic communication plan in the officiating community that addresses the alarming trend that is a lack of certified referees in youth athletics. The data was collected through online surveys that were distributed to active referees in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association. While individuals identified many motivations, results suggested that the theme of *enjoyment in affiliation* or the “love of the game” is far and away the leading reason for referees to both begin their careers and continue their careers, as the study reveals that intrinsic motivation is extremely significant for officials. Further, *referee abuse* is the leading reason that referees have pondered walking away from the game. Finally, while the reasons are still unknown, the demographic portion of the research did communicate that the respondents generally belonged to the higher socioeconomic classes of society. They were also predominantly and disproportionately white, exclusively male, and held advanced educational degrees at a higher rate than the general population. Higher household incomes and a median age that would be considered by most as middle-aged were also themes that emerged, while most had played soccer competitively at a minimum of the high school level.

Conclusion

While the research identified a slight shift in motivation as referees progressed through their officiating careers, it is evident that intrinsic motivation and the enjoyment that individuals receive from being involved in the game are by far the most significant motivators. This was amplified in the aspect of

demographic research that pointed towards a strong trend where many current referees also played competitively at one time.

Extrinsic motivations like financial interests actually decreased over time, while other intrinsic motivations like the desire to “give back” actually increased. This reflects that, at least in this instance, while officiating may resonate as more of a “job” when starting out, it transitions to something that is closer to a hobby for many. Additionally, for the purposes of developing a strategic communication plan that helps to recruit and retain officials, it is important to understand that these motivations do change over the course of a career. For example, if younger, new officials are the target audience for recruitment, highlighting the financial component and the opportunities for advancement could be a successful communication strategy. This is vital to addressing the crisis of an official’s shortage as many of the older referees that expressed thoughts about walking away from the game cited *physical limitations*. Further, messaging towards current officials that comes from a governing body might reinforce things like camaraderie, and the opportunities for enjoyable exercise that come with the vocation of a referee.

Perhaps the most alarming piece of data came from the fact that 62% of respondents indicated that they had seriously thought about walking away from the game in the last three years. The leading reason was *referee abuse*, while other factors also included *external life conflicts* (something that is largely unavoidable) and *lack of perceived organizational support*. With this in mind, it is crucial that strategic communication plans transmit the themes of support from overarching organizations while also communicating that they are taking an active role in addressing referee abuse. These two are closely related in many instances, and have been recurring themes in prior research as well. Finally, while many think that low compensation is a leading cause for referees to quit their vocation, this idea was nearly non-existent among respondents.

Finally, circling back to the Knowledge Gap Theory of Mass Communication, the demographic data revealed that there is a consistent disconnect between the referee population and the socioeconomic status trends in the community. The respondents generally belonged to the higher socioeconomic classes of society, were predominantly and disproportionately white, exclusively male, and held advanced educational degrees at a higher rate than the general population. Higher household incomes relative to the general population were also a consistent trend. With this information, it is important that strategic communication appeals to all segments of society to break free from the traditional “good old boys” club that exists in many officiating communities. Further research will need to be conducted to determine where and why these demographic themes exist.

Limitations

A main limitation of this project revolves around the research population in relation to the question of why referees decide to quit their vocation as officials. The participants in this study are all active officials, and therefore may not serve as the greatest reflection as to why referees do walk away as it quite clearly has not reached that point for most of the respondents. Additionally, the relatively small sample size of research participants may not reflect the same trends that could be found in a larger, more diverse participant pool in terms of both number and location as this study is confined to a single referee association in western Kentucky. Further, the implementation of Cohen’s Kappa as a method to establish inter-coder reliability would be more effective with a larger sample size.

Finally, through the use of an inductive approach to develop themes within the coding process, it is possible that I, as someone with fair amount of experience as a licensed referee, could unintentionally seek out specific ideas that resonate with my own thoughts and emotional responses based on my experiences in the vocation. However, the impact of this limitation should be minimal as an independent coder was utilized.

Recommendations for Further Research

Looking ahead towards further progress in this arena, future research is needed to address the limited demographic diversity in the referee community. Why is the referee community, at least according to this study, attracting a very limited segment of the population? Additionally, while this research addresses much of the *why* when it comes to referee motivation, it is also important to identify the *how* – especially when it comes to the recruitment of new officials. How did they learn about the opportunity to officiate? Were they the target audience of a strategic communication plan, or do many referees simply get involved in the vocation through personal connections and networking that is closely tied to socioeconomic status?

Finally, while the theme of *enjoyment in affiliation* is closely connected to intrinsic motivation in both the reasons for beginning and the reason for remaining, research dedicated to current players – a group that surely has a love for the game, and the reasons they are not making the transition from player to referee, would be valuable in the effort to combat the referee shortage that exists today.

Recommendations for a Strategic Communication Plan

The findings of this research can contribute to the development of a communication strategy revolving around both the recruitment and retention of referees. Understanding the demographic trends in the current officiating pool, it is vital that recruitment campaigns appeal to underrepresented groups – specifically women and people of color. Strategic plans should also target former players whose competitive playing careers have recently ended as the current officiating pool reflects that these referees are likely ones to have longer “survival rates” in the vocation. These individuals will help combat the rising median age of the officiating population, and are also likely to possess a high level of intrinsic motivation or *enjoyment in affiliation* – a trait that this research revealed is the leading motivational factor for both recruitment and retention. For these younger prospective officials, strategic

plans can also place a greater emphasis on external motivations such as monetary compensation and the opportunity for advancement as these extrinsic values are more relevant to this demographic.

When it comes to retention, this research lays the groundwork for a strategic communication plan that should not be as concerned with external benefits, but rather on combating referee abuse and offering organizational support for officials that do face conflict. This study identified that referee abuse is the leading reason why current officials would decide to walk away from their vocation, and pushing campaigns that emphasize “zero tolerance” for abuse while also highlighting mentorship and the opportunity to receive guidance from within the referee community from experienced officials could be extremely beneficial.

Finally, as it relates to both recruitment and retention, a strategic communication plan should attempt to mend the public’s opinion of referees. With prior research indicating that the media does play a significant role in a referee’s perceived failure, lack of confidence, and diminished self-esteem (Belkacem & Salih, 2018), a strategic plan could be to stress the “human element” of officials. The robot-like public perception (Balch & Scott, 2007) of officials that the media has created leads to a fragmented idea of what actions are acceptable in a game environment. Above all, referees are *human* and should be treated as such. The referee should never be considered the “enemy” of the game, but rather as a vital component that keeps the *spirit* of the game intact (Webb, 2016). With the consideration of the aforementioned, the role of a referee can become much more desirable.

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Appendix A – Informed Consent Form

Call for Participation in a study: *An Analysis of Soccer Referee Demographics and Motivational Factors in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association*

Investigator: Daniel Hasko

Faculty Mentor: Bellarmine A. Ezumah

Telephone: 270-809-3171

Department: Journalism and Mass Communications

Campus Address: 210 Wilson Hall

Dear Participants,

My name is Dan Hasko – a graduate student of Media Studies at Murray State University in Murray, KY. I am conducting a research to investigate soccer referee demographics and motivational factors pertaining to retention within the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association. Prior research has indicated that not only do external factors such as referee abuse and the opportunity for advancement have an impact on retention, but also intrinsic motivation such as the enjoyment that individuals receive from being affiliated with high school sports and the game of soccer. Prior research among some groups of officials in the United States have also revealed trends that referee communities are lacking diversity whether that be in age, race, education level, or other demographic factors.

With the aforementioned in mind, I therefore invite you to kindly take a few moments to answer some questions; the process will take 10 to 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire is ready online and the link to the website is provided below. Please note the following:

1. The purpose of this study is to analyze the demographic information from members of the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association (WKSOA) and the motivational factors that pertain to both retention or possible departure from their officiating vocation.
2. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw/stop participating at any time.
3. All of your responses will remain anonymous. (No one will know which answers are yours.)
4. Although your responses will remain anonymous, your data/answers may be combined with the data/answers of others and submitted for presentation at conventions or in publications in scholarly journals.
5. There are no risks associated with your participation. Your answer will in no way adversely affect your job.
6. There are no direct benefits to you for your participation.
7. All survey responses that the researcher receives will be treated confidentially and stored on a secure server. However, given that the surveys can be completed from your computer (e.g.,

personal, work, school), we are unable to guarantee the security of the computer on which you choose to enter your responses. As a participant in this study, the researcher wants you to be aware that certain “key logging” software programs exist that can be used to track or capture data that you enter and/or websites that you visit.

8. Your completion of this questionnaire indicates that you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

Thank you!

Survey Link: <https://forms.gle/73sdw1kkppHwCfAr6>

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the MSU IRB Coordinator at (270) 809-2916 or msu.irb@murraystate.edu.

Appendix B- Solicitation Letter

Hello Everyone,

My name is Daniel Hasko, and I am a graduate student in the department of Journalism & Mass Communications at Murray State University, USA. I am conducting an analysis on the demographics and motivational factors in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association. The results are expected to reveal the demographics of the high school soccer officials in Western Kentucky, while also determining the most reported reasons why officials began their officiating careers, continue their officiating careers, and finally why they would think about potentially leaving their vocation as a referee. If you could take about 10 minutes to complete a short survey on Google forms, it would be greatly appreciated. I will provide the link to the survey. Your answers will provide great value to my research.

Thank you for your time,

Contact:

Daniel Hasko

E-mail: dhasko@murraystate.edu

262-939-7390

Appendix C – Survey Questionnaire

Survey Questions: *An Analysis of Soccer Referee Demographics and Motivational Factors in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association*

12. How many years have you been officiating high school soccer?
13. How old are you?
14. What is your approximate gross yearly household income?
15. What is your Race?
16. What is your gender?
17. What is your highest level of soccer PLAYING experience?
18. What is your highest level of education?
 - Did not complete high school
 - Completed High School/GED Equivalent
 - Completed Two-Year / Associate's College Degree
 - Completed Bachelor's Degree
 - Completed Master's Degree
 - Completed Professional / Doctoral Degree
19. Why did you begin officiating high school soccer?
20. Why do you continue officiating?
21. Have you seriously thought about quitting your officiating vocation in the last three years?
22. If the answer to the previous is yes, why would you decide to quit officiating?

Survey Link: <https://forms.gle/73sdw1kkppHwCfAr6>




MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

328 Wells Hall
Murray, KY 42071-3318
270-809-2916 • msu.irb@murraystate.edu

TO: Bellarmine Ezumah, Journalism and Mass Communication

FROM: Jonathan Baskin, IRB Coordinator 

DATE: 3/5/2021

RE: Human Subjects Protocol I.D. – IRB # 21-121

The IRB has completed its review of your student's Level 1 protocol entitled *An Analysis of Soccer Referee Demographics and Motivational Factors in the Western Kentucky Soccer Officials Association*. After review and consideration, the IRB has determined that the research, as described in the protocol form, will be conducted in compliance with Murray State University guidelines for the protection of human participants.

The forms and materials that have been approved for use in this research study are attached to the email containing this letter. These are the forms and materials that must be presented to the subjects. Use of any process or forms other than those approved by the IRB will be considered misconduct in research as stated in the MSU IRB Procedures and Guidelines section 20.3.

Your stated data collection period is from 3/5/2021 to 5/7/2021.

If data collection extends beyond this period, please submit an Amendment to an Approved Protocol form detailing the new data collection period and the reason for the change.

This Level 1 approval is valid until 3/4/2022.

If data collection and analysis extends beyond this date, the research project must be reviewed as a continuation project by the IRB prior to the end of the approval period, 3/4/2022. You must reapply for IRB approval by submitting a Project Update and Closure form (available at murraystate.edu/irb). You must allow ample time for IRB processing and decision prior to your expiration date, or your research must stop until such time that IRB approval is received. If the research project is completed by the end of the approval period, then a Project Update and Closure form must be submitted for IRB review so that your protocol may be closed. It is your responsibility to submit the appropriate paperwork in a timely manner.

The protocol is approved. You may begin data collection now.

**Opportunity
afforded**

murraystate.edu